

## Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, February 21, 1901

Volta Bureau, Feb. 21, 1901. Dear Mabel:—

I have just recd. a note from Sir Wm. Crookes, in which he says:—

“When I had the pleasure of meeting you at Prof. Dewar's last year, you were good enough to say you thought you could give us a Friday evening discourse some time during the after Easter session. I have accordingly put your name down provisionally for the last Friday evening on the list, namely, the 7th of June. I hope you will be able to be in London at that time, and will consent to give a lecture. I need not assure you that the members will listen with the greatest interest to anything you may bring before them.

“The subject I will leave to you to select, knowing that anything you lecture on will be not only of great scientific value, but attractive to our audience.

“Kindly let me know your decision as soon as you conveniently can, and with kind regards to Mrs. Graham Bell and family,

Believe me, very truly yours, (Signed) William Crookes. Hon. Sec.”

To this I have prepared the following reply but cannot make up my mind to send it, for reasons that you will see a little later.

“My dear Sir William:—

Your note of the 7th inst. recd. Friday evening, the 7th of June, will be quite convenient for my lecture before the Royal Institution; and I am sure that Mrs. Bell, who is spending the

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winter on the Continent, will feel grateful to you for compelling me to cross the Atlantic at that time.

"I should like to speak upon the following subject, if it would be a suitable topic for a discourse before the Royal Institution: —

"The Conquest of the Air — An Unsolved Problem from the Nineteenth Century".

In such a lecture I would propose to treat in general 2 terms the attempts that have been made in the past to solve this problem, illustrating freely with lantern slides: Then point out briefly the lines of progress that have been made, and project them into the future for the guidance of future investigators — indicating those directions in which efforts might be most usefully expended. Kindly let me know as soon as possible whether this subject will be satisfactory.

"With kind regards to Lady Crookes,"

I am, Yours very sincerely, (Signed) Alexander Graham Bell."

I was just about to send this letter when Prof. Henry called, and in the course of conversation I happened to say I proposed to give a lecture at the Royal Institution in England in June, on the subject of "The Conquest of the Air — An Unsolved Problem from the Nineteenth Century". He said that was a fine title and very attractive. So I asked him what he thought it was all about. Well, he hemmed and hawed for a moment, and then supposed that it was about METEOROLOGY. It is only fair to say that I had been talking to him just before about the ideas concerning rain I expressed in my last letter to Daisy. I found to my surprise that the title had not aroused in his mind the idea of flying machines at all. After he had gone I hailed Duncan, to see what he thought of the title, and found him a hopeless case indeed! Didn't even know the meaning of the word conquest.

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We had a very nice Wednesday evening meeting last night, and I took the opportunity of repeating the title of the lecture to two or three gentlemen to find out what idea was conveyed to their mind, by the words "Conquest of the Air", &c. Tyler thought it evidently had something to do with the utilization of the air for practical purposes. I asked him to be more specific. "Well, — Wireless Telegraphy 3 said he. Another gentleman guessed liquid air and its uses. But not one of the four people I consulted had the remotest glimmering conception of flying machines. I have not therefore sent the letter.

I am afraid of the whole subject in the first place and in the second do not wish to send a letter that might in any way prove mis-leading. Sir William Crookes must be made to understand flying machines, if nobody else does. I don't know what I am going to do about it. I am afraid that lecture will never be given.

General Wilson was at our meeting last night and got off rather a queer story. It was a regular story evening, rather than a scientific meeting. Mr. Watkins started us with an extraordinary yarn about slate pencils writing letters by themselves when shut up between two slates face to face, tied together tightly by a ribbon. He held the slates in his own hand and could hear and feel the slate pencils scratching away inside. Then with his own hand cut the tape, opened the slates (which he had himself previously washed clean), and there found a message written to him, and signed by a deceased relative. This gave the key to the whole evening, and ghost stories and spiritual mediums usurped the place of science.

General Wilson told a story of a gentleman who had lost his wife. She had arranged with him that if it were possible she should communicate with him after death. So he went to a medium and sure enough he heard his wife's voice speaking to him, and he said: —

"Arriet are you 'ere?"

"Yes, 'ennery".

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"Are you 'appy 'arriet?"

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"Yes, 'ennery".

"Are you 'appier 'arriet than you were with me?"

"Yes 'ennery".

"Where are you 'arriet"?

"In hell, 'ennery".

DENOUEMENT.

Your loving husband Alec.

Belongs in Drawer No. 16 ... DR. BELL'S ROOM. Hubbard Memorial Hall. 1156 - 16th Street, Washington, D. C.

P.S. I have decided to send the letter to Sir Wm. Crookes after all, simply appending to it the following Postscript: —

P. S. I submitted the title of my proposed lecture to one or two friends here, and was surprised to find that they failed to get the idea that the lecture related to balloons, flying-machines, &c. If, after reading the above letter, you also failed to get this idea, please substitute the title: —

"Aerial Transit:—An Unsolved Problem from the Nineteenth Century".

This at all events is specific, but I prefer the other if not misleading."

AGB

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P. S. Bell & Co. have just notified me that the American Security & Trust Co. have just deposited to our credit the dividend of the International Bell Telephone Co. amounting to:—  
\$22,500.00

I will see Charlie at once and get him to make a temporary investment of \$15,000, so that we may be getting some interest for the money not required for current expenses. That will leave \$7,500 in the bank. Fortunately I have not yet given my note for \$4,000 and shall not do so now. We have bills here amounting to about \$3,500, which will leave \$4,000 in the bank from the International Bell Telephone Dividend, which together with the last balance of \$900 will leave \$4,900 available until our next dividends come in.

AGB